Portfolios in EFL Courses
Integrating Instruction and Assessment for Autonomous Learning

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Abstract

Interest in portfolios in language teaching has grown steadily over the past several decades. Much research on portfolios has been carried out in North America and deals with their suitability for large-scale assessments. Recently, however, foreign language educators have investigated portfolios as a form of assessment and an instructional tool that supports learner autonomy. This paper discusses a portfolio approach in an intermediate English writing course at a Japanese university. After sketching the theoretical background of this approach, I outline the day-to-day process of the course and then discuss some of the issues that arose in managing and evaluating it.

Key words: portfolio, assessment, instruction, English as a foreign language

1. INTRODUCTION

Portfolios have become a regular feature of writing instruction in many North American educational settings, especially at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Originally proposed as an alternative form of assessment to timed essay tests, writing portfolios now have their own body of theory and research which demonstrates their usefulness across a variety of courses and programs (see, for example, Belanoff & Dickson, 1991; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Yancey & Weiser, 1997). When they are used carefully, portfolios engage "both students and teachers in continual discussion, analysis, and evaluation of their *processes* as learners and writers, as well as multiple academic products" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, p. 246; emphasis in original). More fundamentally, portfolios enable the principled collection and evaluation of a number of texts, thus allowing students to demonstrate more of their strengths.

While empirical research on portfolios in second language (L2) writing is as yet scarce (Hamp-Lyons, 2006), specialists have recognized their applicability to courses and programs for non-native speakers (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hyland, 2002). Much of the discussion in the L2 literature has focused on portfolios as a program-level assessment tool, and has also been largely oriented to ESL contexts, namely North American universities. Recently, however, teachers in one EFL context (Japan) have begun to explore the potential uses of portfolios as an instructional tool in a variety of language courses, including writing (Howrey, 2007), reading (Mineishi, 2002), and oral communication (Shimo, 2003). Following in this vein, this paper describes the implementation of a portfolio approach in a university-level academic writing course. I will first outline how portfolios came to be used

in writing instruction, as well as the common features of portfolio approaches. Then I will provide examples of how I adapted my course to a portfolio approach.

2. PORTFOLIOS IN COMPOSITION

A portfolio is essentially a collection of work assembled over time that demonstrates a person's strengths and abilities, usually in a particular field. It may be put together for a specific objective, such as to apply for a job or educational program, or it may be gradually added to over the course of a career and used for a variety of purposes. Long before portfolios were introduced into composition, they were well known in certain professional and educational fields, especially those related to graphic arts and design. More recently, portfolios have been used for professional development in many different areas, primarily because they allow for a more in-depth presentation of skills and qualifications (as compared, for example, to a resume), but also because they can be used to promote reflection on one's accomplishments. For this last reason, portfolios have been particularly effective in teacher training programs (Antonek, McCormick & Donato, 1997; Hamp-Lyons, 2006).

Portfolios came into composition as part of a more general concern with the validity of large-scale tests used to assess students' writing abilities. This concern led first to the development of essay tests which gave test-takers one or more topic prompts to write about within a specified time limit, and which were scored holistically. Questions of validity remained, however, as teachers and test developers realized that a single essay, written under time constraints with little or no choice of topic on the part of the writer, did not adequately represent the way writing was commonly taught; nor did it represent the way most writers actually composed (Belanoff & Dickson, 1991; Hamp-Lyons, 1991). Consequently, portfolio-based assessments were advocated as an alternative to "one-shot" essay exams because they provided a systematic means of evaluating a more authentic writing sample: a greater number and variety of texts, some or all of which have been produced under more realistic conditions. Moreover, portfolio-based assessments do not in themselves presume any particular scoring method (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998), and can be flexibly adapted to varying program and course goals. Thus, portfolios have in some cases replaced the more traditional essay exam, and in other cases acted as a supplementary avenue whereby a writer can appeal negative exam results.

3. PRINCIPLES OF PORTFOLIO-BASED COURSES

Advocates of portfolios in writing instruction (for example, Hamp-Lyons, 2006) tend to note three underlying principles that guide their implementation in courses and programs: collection, selection, and reflection. How, and to what extent, these principles are put into practice will, of course, vary according to the educational context, student needs, course goals, and other factors. Therefore, they are perhaps best viewed as ideals towards which instructors can strive as they adapt portfolios to their own pedagogical circumstances.

3.1. Collection

A portfolio is a collection of work produced over time and assembled for a specific purpose (such as evaluation at the end of a course or program). It may simply be all the writing produced by a student during a single course or academic year, or it may involve larger time frames, more than one course, and more selective samplings of work. Ideally, however, the portfolio is a subset of a larger collection of writing (Yancey, 1992). That is, it represents only a portion of the writer's entire body of work. On a practical level, this means that writers have to save all of their written work for possible inclusion at some later date. No longer are they able to submit assignments and then forget about them once they have received a grade. Rather, with a portfolio system, writers are required to hang onto their writing and so are encouraged to feel a greater sense of ownership and accomplishment.

3.2. Selection

The contents of the portfolio are determined through a process of selection, which in turn reflects the specific purpose and pedagogical context of the portfolio. A portfolio submitted for evaluation at the end of a course will likely be structured to reflect the assignments, genres, and other activities of the course. More importantly, portfolio contents also reflect the value that the course places on different aspects of writing. Thus, if a course places a high value on revision, this can be reflected in the portfolio by having students include rough drafts of their writing and explicitly note changes that they have made. Ideally, the writers themselves will have a degree of choice in the selection of portfolio items, although this choice will likely need to be constrained in some way. For instance, a course that includes assignments in several rhetorical modes (comparison/contrast, cause and effect, and so on) can require students to choose one essay from each mode for inclusion in a final portfolio.

3.3. Reflection

The principle of reflection involves students looking back at what they have written and thinking about what it means to their learning and development as writers. It is usually assumed that simply requiring students to save their work and assemble it into a presentable form will engender reflection, especially insofar as students are given freedom to choose the contents of the portfolio. Many proponents, however, suggest having students make their reflection more explicit through the inclusion of pieces of writing in which they evaluate their own progress and explain the contents of their portfolio. One way to do this is through ongoing reflective assignments which students complete as a course is in progress. These could be simple checklists or self-evaluation forms which students fill out by examining their writing for specific features (Howrey, 2007). More complex reflective assignments include cover sheets (Goldstein, 2005) and student-teacher memos (Sommers, 1988), in which students are asked to articulate their main ideas, goals, and intended audience, as well as those aspects of their writing that they would most like feedback on.

Besides ongoing reflection, which usually focuses on individual items within a portfolio, many proponents of portfolios further suggest having writers complete a reflective self-evaluation of the portfolio as a whole. The specific form of this self-evaluation can vary, but it is typically short compared to the other pieces in the portfolio. For example, Mineishi's (2002) courses followed the model presented in Antonek, McCormick and Donato (1997) by having students complete a table-of-contents matrix with columns for different kinds of reflective notes on each piece in the portfolio (for example, "why I selected the entry," "what it shows," and "what I like about it"). Additionally, White (2005) notes that many L1 writing programs which use portfolios for assessment in the United States require a one- or two-page cover letter. He suggests that the cover letter helps not only to promote student reflection, but that it also makes the grading of portfolios more efficient. This is because cover letter assignments typically require students to describe the contents of their portfolios as a coherent whole and tie those contents to course goals and program standards. When grading portfolios, teachers should thus be able to focus mainly on the cover letter while skimming and selectively reading the other items (which have likely already been read and commented on, perhaps by the same teacher who is grading the portfolio).

3.4. Potential Benefits

Given these three principles, advocates of portfolio-based approaches note a number of potential benefits (summarized in Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, and Hyland, 2002). First,

portfolios integrate assessment more closely with classroom instruction. Evaluation of students' writing is "developmental, continuous, comprehensive and fairer…representing writing progress over time, genres and different conditions" (Hyland, 2002, p. 139). In this integrative context, the instrument of assessment (the portfolio itself) is more meaningful to students beyond the grade or numerical score that they receive because it is a record of their achievements and progress. Portfolios encourage teachers and students to see writing assignments as part of a coherent and interrelated whole, rather than a series of disconnected exercises, each of which is submitted for a grade and then forgotten about. Writing assignments which build on and complement one another during a course can be incorporated into the portfolio so as to provide a more complex portrait of students' development as writers.

Portfolios also help to make the goals of process-oriented writing instruction tangible. All too often, writing courses make use of process activities (drafting, feedback, revision, collaboration, and so on) while still evaluating students based on their final products. With a portfolio system, teachers can have students gather some or all of the material related to each piece of writing and present it for evaluation, including rough drafts, commentary from peers and the teacher, copies of outside sources used in the writing, annotated bibliographies—anything relevant to the course or program. Thus, students are held accountable for their processes as well as their products, which in turn discourages a "survivalist mentality" of just completing the minimum requirements for each writing assignment (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, p. 247). Moreover, because grading is usually delayed until the end of the course, feedback on students' writing can be formative. Teachers are largely freed from the need to provide summative comments that explain their grades, and can focus on giving constructive feedback to help students improve their writing without worrying about discouraging them with low marks.

Finally, portfolios are reflective and flexible. As noted earlier, the very act of putting together a portfolio usually requires a certain amount of reflection on the part of the student. However, when portfolios require explicit reflection (for example, through a cover letter), they become a powerful means of encouraging students to critically examine their own writing and progress, and thus become more responsible and independent writers. Furthermore, portfolios do not presume a certain type of writing course, proficiency level, or student. Teachers can flexibly adapt criteria for selecting and evaluating portfolio contents based on the particular goals of the course or program. More importantly, feedback and evaluation can be tailored to those aspects of writing that the teacher wishes to emphasize.

3.5. Potential Limitations

Of course, portfolios involve potential limitations as well, and these need to be carefully considered before teachers adopt a portfolio system in their own courses and programs. First, portfolios can produce a large and seemingly unmanageable amount of work for teachers at one time. For example, a course that requires students to submit all of their written work in a portfolio at the end of the term for evaluation can leave the instructor with an enormous mass of material to wade through and grade. Even when portfolios are read and assessed by a team of teachers, they are by their very nature more time-consuming than a single essay or paper. Portfolios can be conceptually unwieldy as well. They usually include different kinds of writing, and their contents may vary considerably depending on how much freedom students have in the selection of contents. Thus, it may be difficult to reliably grade a set of portfolios according to the same criteria or rubric, a problem which is especially pertinent when portfolios are used at the program-level to assess students' work in more than one course. Finally, because portfolios typically include writing produced over a period of time, authenticity becomes an issue. That is, teachers may question whether the work in the portfolio can rightfully be called the students' own work if they have had time to receive outside help with their writing.

How teachers deal with these potential drawbacks will naturally depend on the pedagogical context in which they are working. However, some general suggestions can be made. Issues of workload and scoring reliability can be addressed in several ways. First, students need to be given explicit directions for selecting the contents of their portfolios, and most (or all) of the writing samples should be papers and assignments that have already received some kind of feedback from an instructor. This is quite easy when portfolios are used in a single course, but it can also be accomplished at the program level by, for example, designating the courses from which writing samples may be chosen, and by requiring that students submit drafts that contain evidence of being read and evaluated by a teacher. Besides explicit selection criteria, teachers also need to make explicit to students their criteria for grading the portfolio. This includes providing students with a copy of the rating scale to be used well in advance of the submission deadline for the portfolio and explaining how assessment of the portfolio is linked to course goals. Finally, teachers can have students include a piece of writing (such as the cover letter described by White, 2005) in which they enumerate the items in the portfolio, give reasons for any choices they have made and generally reflect on their writing progress. Besides being a powerful and theoretically sound pedagogical tool, a reflective assignment, if it is carefully implemented, should also aid

teachers in reading portfolio contents selectively and efficiently without having to re-read and re-evaluate every paper.

The final potential drawback mentioned above, authenticity, is an issue that is not unique to portfolio-based classes and assessments, but one which may come up in any context in which written work is completed outside of class. Short of having students do all of their assignments in class, there is no reasonable mechanism for guaranteeing that students will do all of their own work. However, there are practical ways in which teachers can check on authenticity, such as by having students do regular in-class writing (both formal and informal), and by having students turn in all drafts of each writing assignment. These solutions as well are not unique to portfolio-based writing courses, but the portfolio provides a means of easily comparing students' work over several drafts and assignments. Thus, if a student has plagiarized or otherwise received substantial assistance with a piece of writing, it will likely be clear to the instructor merely by comparing drafts and by checking to see if the student has reasonably accounted for the apparent difference in writing quality in the reflective assignment. Perhaps more important, however, is the fact that students know that their work will be scrutinized in this manner and so are less likely to plagiarize.

4. A PORTFOLIO-BASED WRITING COURSE

I have recently adapted one of the university writing courses that I regularly teach to a portfolio format. This course is the third in a sequence of four and is primarily taken by third-year students. Although there are no prerequisites for the course, many of those who enroll have taken English composition courses previously, so the course could be classified as "high intermediate" or "low advanced" relative to the other courses in the sequence. As I currently teach it, the overall goals of the course are to

- Improve students' ability to write paragraphs and essays;
- Develop students' ability to use support in their writing;
- Develop students' awareness and use of writing process, especially revision.

Students complete four or five writing assignments based on those presented in the first half of the course textbook (Oshima & Hogue, 2006): two paragraphs and two or three essays. Class activities are both process- and product-oriented. Exercises in the textbook are primarily concerned with logical structure of writing (thesis statements, topic sentences, introductions, body paragraphs, and so forth), and ask students to analyze or manipulate model sentences, paragraphs, and essays. In support of the writing assignments, I also have

students complete invention exercises, self- and peer-review activities, and at least one revision of each assignment. In addition to these assignments, which are mainly completed as homework, students also write two timed in-class essays, one at the beginning of the course and one at toward the end, using topic prompts adapted from those used by Sasaki (2004). The purpose of these in-class essays is to give students further practice organizing and writing essays in an exam setting (as many of them take standardized English tests which include a writing component), and also to provide a check on the writing that they complete outside of class.

Using the principles of portfolio-based writing instruction described above, I have adapted this course as follows.

4.1. Collection

Students are introduced to the portfolio approach of the course on the first day of class. A brief description of the final portfolio that will be due at the end of the course is included in the course syllabus, along with the following list of required contents:

1. A cover letter;
2. One paragraph written and revised as homework;
3. Two essays written and revised as homework;
4. One essay written in class and later revised.

Students are also told to keep all related work as they finish each of these assignments. Logistically, this is quite easy as the course is conducted in a computer lab. Not only are students able to keep their own work in electronic form (for example, on a disc or flash drive), but self- and peer-review sheets can usually be completed and saved electronically as well. Later in the course, but well in advance of the last class meeting, students are given a more detailed set of guidelines which includes the evaluation rubric that I use to grade their portfolios (see Appendix A and B).

4.2. Selection

As noted earlier, students' choices as to what they put in their portfolios have to be constrained somewhat, especially if the scope of the portfolio is a single course. Although it is possible to have students include in their portfolios one or more pieces of writing that were not written specifically for the course itself (see Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, pp. 252-253, for an example), in this course as I currently teach it, students are limited to the course writing assignments. Since students write several of each type of assignment, I have them choose the

best one or two of each type for inclusion in their portfolio. In other words, for the paragraph and in-class essay assignments, students choose one out of two; for the homework essay assignments, they choose two out of three. Again, students see no grades on their writing during the course, though they do receive comments from me and from their peers, and they are free to consult with me about their choices for the final portfolio. In short, students get plenty of feedback which should tell them, implicitly or otherwise, which pieces are the most successful. However, the ultimate decision as to which pieces to include lies with the students themselves.

Additionally, students have some freedom to choose the supporting materials that are submitted with each assignment. I specify a minimal set that must accompany each assignment in the portfolio (first and final drafts, and peer- and self-review sheets). Beyond this, if students complete any other work for an assignment (such as further drafts, outlines, or notes) they can include it in their portfolio if they feel that was important in helping them to complete the final draft, and if it helps to demonstrate their writing process.

4.3. Reflection

The primary means of encouraging reflection in this course is a cover letter assignment similar to that advocated by White (2005). I have students follow a business letter format, making the cover letter similar to one that might be submitted as part of a job application. The specific purpose of the cover letter is, first, to get students to think about the writing they have done in the course and to concisely articulate both their specific processes in writing each assignment (especially the assignments completed outside of class) as well as their overall progress as writers. Second, the cover letter serves as an organizer of the whole portfolio by enumerating the items included and listing the materials submitted in conjunction with each assignment. Because the students in the course are generally unfamiliar with this type of assignment, I give them very specific guidelines for completing it, including a cover letter exemplar with language cues and several examples of cover letters completed by students in previous versions of the course.

4.4. Assessment

Perhaps the biggest change that I have had to make to adapt the course to a portfolio format is the method of assessment. Normally I would assess students' writing as assignments are completed using rubrics tailored to each assignment. However, an important principle of portfolio-based teaching which I wanted to follow was that of delaying the

scoring of students' writing until the end of the course (that is, after portfolios have been submitted). Thus, in order to keep the workload manageable, I had to develop a scoring method that would help me to assess each portfolio as a whole without having to assign a separate score to each piece of writing. To this end, I created an analytic scoring rubric which divided the assessment into four categories: content, organization, process, and language and mechanics (see Appendix B). The criteria for each category included assessment points that applied to all of the writing in the portfolio (such as the use of linking words and phrases to maintain cohesion), as well as those which applied only to specific writing assignments (such as the use of introductions and conclusions in essays).

It should be pointed out that this assessment rubric reflects both my own preference for analytic assessments as well as the specific aspects of writing that were emphasized in the course. As noted earlier, a portfolio-based course does not necessitate any particular assessment format, and portfolios can easily be adapted to other formats (see Hyland, 2002, p. 143, for an example). Also, my assessment rubric weights content and organization more heavily and includes a separate category for process because these were integral to the goals of the course. Naturally, different categories, weightings and criteria can be used depending on the nature of the particular course.

4.5. Practical Issues

Since I first adopted a portfolio approach in this course, several practical issues have arisen regarding students' understanding of the portfolio and my own management of the scoring process. The first time I taught the course using portfolios, a number of students failed to include all of the required support material (in some cases even omitting first drafts of some assignments) despite turning in otherwise complete portfolios, and despite my careful explanations of requirements. Further, many students did not seem to grasp the purpose of the cover letter beyond its function as a kind of table of contents for the portfolio. In fact, several students followed the exemplar a little *too* closely and ended up referring to contents that were not actually included in their own portfolios (but were mentioned in the exemplar as examples of what could be included). Finally, grading students' portfolios required a substantial effort at the end of the term even with a carefully designed rubric. I estimate that in most cases it took me between 45 and 60 minutes to read a portfolio, write comments, and determine a score, which was roughly twice the time that I would expect to spend reading and scoring a final writing assignment.

I have attempted to address these issues as follows. In order to make sure that students understand the portfolio system as fully as possible at the outset, I now provide them with a syllabus in both English and Japanese, as well as regular reminders of the need to keep all work. In preparing students to write a cover letter, I spend more time in class talking about the assignment, and now also have students read examples of cover letters written by students who have previously taken the course. These examples are quite varied in their content, which helps the class to see that even though the cover letter follows a specific form, its substance should be unique to the portfolio and the student. As for managing the scoring workload, I have found that besides just further practice, limiting myself to twenty minutes to comment on and score each portfolio has helped to reduce the end-of-term effort to manageable proportions.

5. CONCLUSION

As I hope the above example illustrates, there are many practical questions that must be considered and addressed in order to successfully manage a portfolio-based writing course for EFL students. However, these issues, while revealing some of the problems that may arise, also underscore the point that a portfolio is not merely a container into which assignments are placed at the end of a course. Rather, portfolios represent a systematic approach to teaching that requires careful and explicit implementation from the very beginning of the course. By keeping the theoretical principles in mind, by establishing clear goals and requirements, and by reiterating these requirements as the course is in progress, the inevitable problems can be effectively addressed, and the portfolio can become a meaningful achievement for learners.

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APPENDIX A: PORTFOLIO GUIDELINES

Introduction

A portfolio is a collection of work that you make so that you can show your skills and abilities. This course uses a portfolio system, which means that you will not receive any grades or scores on your writing during the course. Instead, you will collect your writing assignments at the end of the course and put it together as a portfolio to submit for grading. This means that you will be able to revise your writing as many times as you want during the course, and you will have more opportunities to receive feedback on your writing as you revise. Also, you will be able to choose some of the writing pieces that you include in your portfolio, so you will be able to decide which pieces best show off your English writing skills.

Contents

Checklist

- Cover letter;
- One paragraph written and revised as homework;
- Two essays written and revised as homework;
- One essay written in class and later revised;

Details and Supporting Materials

1. Cover letter: This is a concise introduction to your portfolio which describes each of the contents and also tells how each piece of writing demonstrates your work and learning in the course.
2. One paragraph written and revised as homework: Choose one of the paragraph assignments that you wrote at the beginning of the course and revise it at least once. Include all drafts of the paragraph in your portfolio, a self-editing sheet, and at least one peer-editing sheet. In your cover letter, explain why you chose that paragraph for your portfolio and what you did to revise it.
3. Two essays written and revised as homework: Choose two of the essays that you wrote in the second half of the course to include in your portfolio and revise each essay at least once. For each essay, include all drafts, a self-editing sheet, and at least one peer-editing sheet in your portfolio. In your cover letter, explain why you chose the two essays for your portfolio and what you did to revise each essay.
4. One essay written in class and later revised: Choose one of the in-class essays that you wrote and revise it. Include the original essay and your revision in your portfolio. In your cover letter, explain why you chose the essay for your portfolio and what you did to revise it.

Due Date

The final class meeting is Wednesday, July 23. Your portfolio must be completed and submitted one week after this, *on Wednesday, July 30, 12 pm*. Late submissions will result in a lower final grade or failure to earn credit.

Format

Portfolios can be assembled and submitted electronically (on a disk or as a zip file emailed to the instructor) or as a hard copy (in a folder or binder). In either case, the portfolio must be neatly and clearly organized so that all the contents are accessible and easy to locate. Disks, folders, binders, etc., should be clearly labeled with your name and "English Writing III Portfolio" and can be placed in the box next to the instructor's office door.

APPENDIX B: ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

Category	Points	Criteria	Score
Content	30	• The portfolio contains final drafts of all of the required pieces of writing • Cover letter concisely introduces all of the contents of the portfolio and relates them to learning during the course • Essays and paragraphs each have a clear topic, main idea and purpose • Essays and paragraphs support the main idea with relevant details, examples, and logical arguments	
Organization	30	• The portfolio is clearly organized so that all contents are accessible and easy to locate • Cover letter is organized to describe each of the items in the portfolio in order • Paragraph assignments have clear topic sentences and supporting sentences • Essays are clearly organized into an introduction, body, and conclusion; • Paragraphs within essays have appropriate topic sentences • Linking words and phrases are used in all pieces to maintain cohesion	
Process	20	• Portfolio shows evidence of the writer's use of process, especially revision and feedback, by including all drafts of essays and paragraphs, and self-editing and peer-editing sheets • Any other materials that were used to write any of the assignments (outlines, notes, etc.) can also be included	
Language and Mechanics	20	In all pieces of writing: • Meaning is clear; there are few major errors • Sentences use a variety of structures and words • Spelling and punctuation are accurate • Vocabulary words are used appropriately and grammatically	
		Total	